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Ambedkar and Buddhism

Dhammachari Lokamitra

THE second section of Gopal Guru's note on the 'Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra' (*EPW*, February 16) deserves a reply. This section concentrates on attacking Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG). Guru has based this on Vinay Kamble's articles on TBMSG in the Marathi magazine (now defunct) *Dhammalipi*. It seems he has not read any of the many publications brought out by TMBSG; otherwise one presumes he would have referred to them in his notes. The only conclusion one can reach is that he has not tried to establish the veracity of any of Kamble's points. This is in itself a very improper approach to criticism and leads one to doubt the real intentions behind writing such a report.

The first criticism is concerned with "spiritualising the dalit masses in the State [of Maharashtra]". The word spiritual is admittedly rather confusing although it is often used in TBMSG. Millions of people have converted to Buddhism since 1956 following the example of Ambedkar. He was very concerned that his followers take the Dhamma seriously, otherwise, he said, "people will laugh at this conversion".[1] To this end he wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma*,[2] a 'puja' book[3] and gave them 22 vows[4] to follow. The latter besides repudiating the worship of the Hindu gods, include a commitment to the practice of equality, the Buddha's Eight-Fold Path, the Ten Paramitas and the Panchasheel. It was clear that to Ambedkar there could be no Buddhism without the practice of the Dhamma, which if practised systematically, gradually bring about highly positive and creative changes in one's mental states and attitudes, enabling one to take more control over one's own life and to help others more effectively. It is this process that is meant by the word 'spiritual', but as it is used in other religions with completely different goals, it is not a very satisfactory word.

Gopal Guru uses the word 'dalit'. In my experience most Buddhists in Maharashtra do not like to apply this word to themselves, as it refers to them in terms of what they are trying to leave behind, and not in terms of their new-found dignity as human beings insisted upon by Ambedkar and encouraged by their conversion to Buddhism.

TBMSG holds regular Dhamma shibirs, open to all, during which, according to Gopal Guru, "the participants are asked to undergo transcendental meditiation to overcome material as well as mental problems". Transcendental meditation is what the Maharishi Yogi's system is called and consists of mechanically chanting a mantra. TBMSG's system of meditation is quite different. It does not consist of chanting a mantra and going into a trance as Gopal Guru makes out. Meditation in Buddhism is a conscious process and does not involve going into a trance-like state. Two most traditional Buddhist meditation practices are taught in these shibirs, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Maitri Bhavana, or the cultivation of an attitude of universal loving kindness. These states of mind are basic to Dhamma practice. Ambedkar emphasises the development of these states of mind in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. On page 87 he talks about the importance of Samma Satti, or Perfect Mindfulness. On page 265 he develops this further under the heading 'Thoughtfulness and Mindfulness'. As for the question of maitri, attention may be drawn to the section entitled 'Dhamma to be Saddhamma Must Promote Maitri' starting on page 210, and also to page 413 where he gives the most famous of the Buddha's teachings on 'maitri'. But these are only to illustrate the point. References to these two states of mind fill the book. Meditation is a tool for the systematic cultivation of these higher positive states of mind, and as such it is central to serious Buddhist practice. It may be possible to develop these elevated and highly positive states of mind without formal meditation practice, but for most people that is extremely difficult and open to rationalisation.

Gopal Guru's next criticism is to accuse TBMSG of stripping off the political content of Ambedkar's philosophy. Ambedkar started a many-faceted movement. TBMSG does not pretend to work in all these areas. It is especially concerned with the area of Buddhist teaching and practice which had been largely neglected since the conversion. An incident told by Nanakchand Rattu, Ambedkar's personal assistant, and verified by others who were present, throws light on Ambedkar's own attitude. Some of his followers were trying to persuade him right until the last minute to postpone the conversion until after the next elections. He was upset with them, saying that they did not understand the importance he attached to Buddhism. Since then, compared to the energy that has gone into politics, very little has gone into trying to understand and practise the Dhamma.

Gopal Guru is right in maintaining that Ambedkar did try and bring out the social aspect of the Buddha's teaching, which has been somewhat neglected in recent times and for this the Buddhist world is increasingly grateful. Today Buddhism is very popular in the West, and there is a great deal of importance attached to the social implications of the Buddha's teaching. In this sense Ambedkar could be said to be the forerunner of this Western Buddhist movement. At the same time he was quite clear about the basis for social change in Buddhism. In November 1956, at a World Fellowship of Buddhists' Conference in Kathmandu, he made the following statement: "The greatest thing the Buddha has done is to tell the world that it can only be reformed by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world."[5] Without individual change, in other words, there can be no social change.

A major part of the work of the TBMSG in India is its social wing, known as Bahujan Hitay. Today 10 hostels (there are plans for many more) in Maharashtra and elsewhere as well as extensive health and educational work in the slums of Pune are being run. All this work is run by local practising Buddhists who are followers of Ambedkar. They see this work as an inextricable part of their Dhamma practice. Meditating on 'maitri' and 'karuna', one cannot close one's eyes to the condition of people all around. To say that TBMSG is making the "dalits quite insensitive to the problems of dalits" is therefore quite untrue. It seems neither Gopal Guru nor Vinay Kamble has any knowledge whatsoever of TBMSG's extensive social work.

I am not quite sure how Gopal Guru can state with such certainty that "not one among the followers of the Sangha protested against the government's decision to delete the 'Rama Krishna Riddles' from Ambedkar's writings". There were lakhs of people protesting. TBMSG runs perhaps a hundred Dhamma classes a week in Maharashtra, to say nothing of special lectures and lecture series. Can he say categorically that this subject was not taken up? The quarterly *Golden Drum*, published by TBMSG in London had a special report on the Riddles affair.[6]

But while protests may help, to enable long-term effects other substantial and constructive work is required. The problem starts with followers of Ambedkar themselves. Ambedkar emphasised that his followers must get rid of their belief in god. The first few of the 22 vows deal

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with this. Obviously if one still worships the old gods it presents a problem. One is still effectively a Hindu, and in Hinduism one's place is still right at the bottom. By worshipping the old gods one is thus continuing to wear the old religious shackles with all their psychological effects that have been worn for centuries. More than that, belief in god, being based on superstition, opens one to all manner of exploitation. Ambedkar felt so strongly about this that he said in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, "belief in god is the most dangerous thing" (p 178).

But the sad fact is that many Buddhists still worship the old gods, thus unwittingly maintaining the old religious conditioning. In the last 12 years perhaps several thousand people have attended Dhamma shibirs organised by TBMSG, where they both learn meditation and study a Buddhist text or something written by Ambedkar on Buddhism (the atmosphere is far from restrictive as implied in Gopal Guru's note, but is pervaded by a joy and a sense of meaningfulness that few have experienced before). Perhaps the most universal experience for those who have attended such a shibir for the first time is understanding how Ambedkar could say in the 22 vows, "Now I have taken a new life". Buddhism becomes meaningful to them as never before. They begin to understand how through Dhamma practice they can lead much more creative lives that hitherto they had thought possible, and thus develop a confidence in it that many did not have before. Most of them will go home and throw out the pictures and murtis of the old gods, having eradicated their psychological dependence on them. Not only that they will pass on what they have learnt to neighbours.

"In this situation, can we dispense with Buddhism? Perhaps not." It seems from this that Gopal Guru really would like to dispense with Buddhism, and that to him it has little of intrinsic value in itself, its only value being as a political tool. He makes this clearer towards the end when he suggests making changes to the most basic Buddhist principles. He wants, first, to change the Trisaren. These are the Buddha, representing the ideal of *human enlightenment* to which Buddhists aspire, the Dhamma, the practices leading to that state, and the Sangha, the fellowship of those likewise practising the Dhamma. These ideals are shared by Buddhists throughout the world and are thus a unifying factor among them. The Trisaren as Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha were basic to Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism. Admittedly at the time of conversion he was hesitant about taking the Sangha saren because he was extremely dissatisfied with the conduct of the present-day bhikshu sangha (he was dissuaded from this course of action because recognition from the rest of the Buddhist world was very important for him). But that did not mean that he did not appreciate the principle of Sangha; he makes it clear that he did in 'The Buddha and the Future of His Religion'.[7] He saw Sangha as providing a model of the ideal society, creating a body of deeply committed Buddhists who could impartially guide others, and creating a society whose members were free to render service to the people. That the present bhikshu Sangha was not living up to these ideals was for him a most perplexing question and he called in no uncertain terms for a new kind of Sangha.

Gopal Guru wants to change these three principles to equality, fraternity and freedom. What he does not seem to realise is that these three principles are implicit in the Dhamma itself, and this was brought out by Ambedkar. Therefore there is no need to change the Trisaren. Liberty, equality and fraternity are implanted within it.

Not only does Gopal Guru want Buddhism without the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, but he wants to separate Panchasheel from his own version of the Trisaren. Panchasheel is the most basic commitment to ethical behaviour and the foundation of social relations in Buddhism. Guru states that "unfortunately the contemporary Buddhist leadership in Maharashtra still argues for the combination of Trisaren and Panchasheel which, in effect, has led to the recession of Buddhist movement in Maharashtra and suspended Ambedkar's project of converting Hindu Indian into Buddhist Indian". No one who has read even a little of what Ambedkar wrote on Buddhism could possibly go along with this view. Morality was basic to Buddhism according to Ambedkar. One quote from 'The Buddha and the Future of His Religion' is enough to show this: "The religion of the Buddha is morality. It is imbedded in religion. Buddhist religion is nothing if not morality. It is true that in Buddhism there is no god. In place of god there is morality. What god is to other religions, morality is to Buddhism."

I am afraid the project Gopal Guru is talking about is not that of Ambedkar but of those who have attempted to usurp Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism to serve their own political ends. One would have hoped for a little more substance in his arguments.

Notes

1 Bhagwan Das, *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*, Vol II, Bheem Patrika Publications, Jullunder, 1969. Conversion speech at Nagpur.
2 Siddarth Publications, Bombay, 1974.
3 *Bauddha Puja Paath*, compiled by Ambedkar, Bombay, 1956.
4 Included in *Bauddha Vandana Suttasangrah*, Triratna Grantha Mala, Pune, 1987.
5 *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*, op cit, Vol II.
6 *Golden Drum*, May-July 1988 [2531], No 9, Windhorse Publications, 354, Crookesmoor Road, Sheffield, SIO, IBH, UK.
7 In *The Maha Bodhi Journal*, Calcutta, 1950.

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